

News

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Greensburg building project making history

BY PHYLLIS JACOBS GRIEKSPoor
The Wichita Eagle

GREENSBURG - Christy Pyatt landed her clerical job with the city building department just three weeks before Greensburg was wiped out by a tornado on May 4, 2007. She had been looking for a place to live.

This summer, Pyatt will finally have that place.

In about 90 days, she'll be moving into a new home at 701 S. Grove in Greensburg, thanks to an unprecedented effort by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development Community Self Help Housing program and 16 public, private and nonprofit agencies that are working with it.

Pyatt is among 20 homeowners who will get new homes in the first round of Community Self Help construction being coordinated by Mennonite Housing of Wichita.

Officials hope many more homes are to come.

"We have more than 50 applicants right now," said



G. Marc Benavidez/The Wichita Ea

From left, Wayne Burnham takes pictures of his new lot in Greensburg, as his brother-in-law Carl Cagle and wife Virginia Burham look on. Burnham is one of 20 families who will have homes constructed under the Agency supported Greensburg Community Self-Help Housing Program.



[Special section: The Greensburg Tornado - coverage, photos and more](#)

AFFORDABLE HOUSING PARTNERS

- City of Greensburg
- USDA Rural Development
- United Way of the Plains
- Kansas Housing Resource Corp.
- South Central Kansas Tornado Recovery

Chuck Banks, state director of the Rural Development program in Kansas. "We'd like to find a way to build a house for every one of them."

Groundbreaking effort

Banks' optimism stems from the success of the initial round and the partnerships that have developed.

"This has never been attempted anywhere in the nation," Banks said Saturday at a groundbreaking ceremony in Greensburg, marking the start of the building project.

"We are creating a model that we hope can be replicated, making Greensburg a leader in the effort to meet the nation's need for affordable rural housing."

The building effort is in addition to the scores of new homes already built or under construction by Greensburg residents who are rebuilding on the lots where their homes once stood.

- National Association of Home Builders
- Federal Home Loan Bank of Topeka
- Greensburg State Bank/Hudson Oil Foundation
- Mennonite Housing-Wichita
- The Salvation Army
- Community Housing Services-Wichita
- Greensburg GreenTown
- U.S. Department of Energy
- National Renewable Energy Laboratory
- Integrated Building and Construction Solutions
- South Central Community Foundation
- Kiowa County Commission
- Greensburg Self-Help Families

To see some of the projects under way in Greensburg, check out these Web sites:

- www.greensburgks.org
- www.greensburggreentown.org
- www.547artscenter.org
- www.bigwell.org
- www.greensburgcubed.org

United Way of the Plains also has been a key player in the effort.

Pat Hanrahan, president of the United Way, said gifts to help build homes in Greensburg have literally come from all over the world.

"Our first gift was a very generous \$100,000 from a Korean golfer who won the money in Tulsa and donated it," Hanrahan told the Greensburg residents, friends and supporters who turned out for Saturday's cold, windy groundbreaking.

Hanrahan also announced that a gift just received will provide a range, refrigerator, washer and dryer for each of the new homes.

He also presented the city with a 3-inch-thick notebook titled "Messages from the Heart," filled with messages the United Way received with gifts, and a hand-drawn card with messages from state prison inmates who sent donations.

Keeping homes in reach

Donations have helped keep the energy efficient, "green" homes within reach of more people, said Andy Bias with Mennonite Housing.

Each of the homes will have a two-car garage, either two or three upstairs bedrooms and a full basement with a safe room, a roughed-in bath and two more bedrooms.

"We are doing everything we can to make sure that the payments on these homes will be less than \$500 a month," he said.

Stephanie Ralstin will get a new home at 312 S. Cherry for her and her two children -- Sierra, 12, and Montana, 14.

"Are we excited? I can't tell you how excited," she said.

New homeowner Michelle Mayes was asked to speak briefly at the ceremony and apologized for not being prepared.

"Of course, I wasn't exactly prepared for May 4 either," she said. "I am so happy to be coming back to Greensburg. I wanted my youngest son to graduate from high school here the same as my oldest two. All I can say is thank you. Thank you, for me and my kids."

It was state Rep. Dennis McKinney, a native of Greensburg, who perhaps summed it up best.

"We've all had some dark moments of doubt and discouragement," he said. "I want to express my thanks to the families who are coming back. I know something that I first realized about 10:30 on the night of May 4 as I walked down the street and found more and more of my neighbors and friends unhurt. This community is blessed.

"And by the way, if you have to live through a disaster, make sure you do it in America. And I recommend Kansas."

Reach P.J. Griekspoor at 316-268-6660 or at pgriekspoor@wichitaeagle.com.